



Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays

Dr. Benjamin E. Mays

Man of Faith and Passion

by Dr. Roslyn R. Yilpet

Dr. Benjamin E. Mays was an outstanding leader, teacher, preacher, and scholar. He saw his life as one of obedience to God. He often quoted Micah 6:8—“He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” He believed one’s character and beliefs should be embodied in actions. Dr. Mays integrated his faith and passion in his life.

In 1894 Benjamin Mays was born in South Carolina to Hezekiah and Louvenia Carter Mays. His father and mother were children when slaves were set free in 1865. Even though it was illegal for slaves to read and write, a white boy secretly taught Mays’s father to read.

Mays’s mother shaped his view of himself and God. She told her eight children, “You are as good as anybody!” She planted his faith in a living and faithful God. He stated in his autobiography, “My mother only had two things to give me—her love and prayers. She gave both with an open heart.” Mays learned from his mother’s life and prayers that God answers prayer.

With his mother’s teaching as a foundation, Mays reached his dream of an advanced education. While working in the fields, he prayed God would enable him to go away to school. Those prayers were answered; he received a high school education, and three collegiate degrees.

At home and in school Mays learned about black heroes such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Paul Dunbar, and Crispus Attucks. This knowledge—and his time spent picking cotton—instilled a passion for social justice, racial equality, and solidarity. He said, “No one has agonized more over the race problem than I have. It has weighed heavily on my mind ever since I saw my first [lynch] mob when I was only four or five years old.”

Mays influenced the world through his faith and advocacy for justice. Mays traveled internationally and influenced church and social organizations. In 1937, he traveled to Oxford, England, to present at a church conference that discussed racial issues. He taught that it is the church’s responsibility to demonstrate God’s view of community—one that transcends all national

and racial divisions. Despite many opposing his teachings, what he taught about equality is biblical.

Mays proclaimed biblical truths while president of Morehouse College. During his tenure, he educated men on the importance of radical, relevant ministry. He taught both students and churches that segregation was an insult to God. His ministry glorified God, even if it went against society. Mays’s ministry influenced many black ministers, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Under Mays’s influence, King felt called to become a minister. Mays’s life and sermons inspired King. Mays said, “King often stayed behind after Tuesday morning chapel to discuss some point I had made. I was not aware how deeply he was impressed by what I said and did until he wrote *Stride Toward Freedom*, in which he indicated that I had influenced his life to a “marked degree.” Martin Luther King, Jr., saw Mays as his spiritual mentor. His influence was evident in King’s language and passion for civil rights.

Mays lived out Micah 6:8. He fulfilled the command in 2 Timothy 2:2 to teach others that they may go and teach others. Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays died in 1984, but his teachings live on through those he taught and their students.



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